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The 3 Most Effective Tools for Community Engagement

by *Hildy Gottlieb*

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A few years ago, when we were hired to help a small environmental organization, their complaint was simple: "Nobody knows who we are or what we do!"

We analyzed their existing communications and community engagement efforts, talking with people both inside and outside the organization, trying to see the full picture of the group's work. Within a short time, we were ready to report our findings.

"We know why nobody knows who you are or what you do," we told them. "You don't tell anyone!"

This group was using a slew of "standard business marketing tools." They had a great brochure, an impressive quarterly journal, PR with local media - many of the tools you'd read about in a standard off-the-shelf small business marketing book. The problem is these marketing tools were ineffective for engaging people with the organization and its work. And for ineffective tools, they were pretty expensive ones at that!

Although these "standard business marketing tools" are not the most effective for Community Benefit organizations, your organization is in luck. The 3 most effective tools for engaging the community with your organization's mission are simple to develop and use, and are **virtually free!**

What To Know Before You Start

Before we get into the tools themselves, it's important to understand what these Community Engagement tools can do that standard business marketing tools cannot. First, the following is a definition we have used for Community Engagement:

Community Engagement is the process of building relationships with community members who will work side-by-side with you as an ongoing partner, in any and every way imaginable, building an army of support for your mission, with the end goal of making the community a better place to live.

From that definition, it is easy to see that before you can engage the community, you need to know what you want to accomplish - the work you want to engage the community to help with! You can only determine what approaches will work best when you have defined your reasons for wanting to engage the community in the first place!

For information about creating a Community Engagement plan,
[Click Here](#)

Why These Approaches Work Best

With so many different tools and approaches, why are these the most effective for engaging individuals in your mission? The answer to that question lies in your neighborhood supermarket.

When you stroll through your local supermarket on a Saturday afternoon, you are likely to find food purveyors at the end of each aisle, handing out samples of pizza or hot dogs or cheese on a stick. The smells fill the store, inviting you to taste it all.

Those food purveyors don't tell you how good their stuff is; they show you. And that is why these three approaches work best for the work your organization is trying to do.

- All 3 approaches engage your audience by showing what the issues are
- All 3 approaches engage your audience by showing what you are trying to do about those issues
- And all 3 approaches engage your audience by showing how they can join your army of friends, to help make the community a better place to live.

Community Engagement Tool #1: Writing

One of the best ways to engage the world with your mission is to write.

Most organizations understand the power of sharing information about their mission in writing, as they watch the effect of their newsletters and direct mail pieces. By extending that writing beyond your own organization, and writing for the general public or for membership associations or others interested in your work, your written wisdom will not just go to those who already know you, but to those who do not know you yet.

This can mean writing articles for newsletters and local newspapers, or it can mean writing a book. In every industry and in every community, there are publications looking for content. Find a list of all the publications within your particular niche (whether it's your geographic community, or your community of interest, such as the regional art or environmental or educational community), and then ask if they would publish an article on an issue of particular concern to their readers. It could be a column on child abuse in a school PTA newsletter, or an article on the effects of eco-tourism for the local lifestyle magazine.

Writing your own articles, editorials, and such is effective for a number of reasons.

1. You will have the opportunity to tell your own story in your own words.
2. You will be communicating about and connecting people with the issues directly affecting the mission of your organization - the definition of advocacy!
3. Through this communication, you will educate, a big part of the mission of just about every organization.
4. The mere publication of the letter or editorial piece will add credibility and publicity for your organization.
5. And once the article is published, you will have copies of this credible piece to send to supporters, friends, etc.

For details about using "Public Writing" to engage an army of friends around your mission, check out **FriendRaising: Community Engagement Strategies for Boards Who Hate Fundraising but Love Making Friends.**
[Click Here](#)

Community Engagement Tool #2: Speaking

Another effective way to engage groups and individuals in the mission you care about is Public Speaking. There are always groups looking for effective speakers - speakers who know their subject and can capture an audience's attention for 15 minutes, 30 minutes, an hour. If you make clear to the group that you are NOT there to ask for money (their main fear when it comes to NonProfits - that you will hit up their group for cash), but just to share what you know about an issue concerning the

community, there are a multitude of speaking engagements just waiting for someone from your organization.

Speaking goes one step beyond writing, because when folks hear you speak, they are getting a direct and tangible sense of your issues, and you are right there, in real time, able to engage their questions and dispel their misconceptions. They will immediately sense the importance of your mission, and how it relates to them personally. Seeing someone speak is as close to snacking on pizza in the supermarket as your audience can get!

If you suffer from stage fright, that's ok - there is a role for non-speakers in this step as well, arranging for speaking opportunities, helping to craft the talk. And if you are hoping to conquer your stage fright, click to this article - it may help. [Click Here](#)

For a downloadable workbook on turning Public Speaking into **Gold** for your organization's mission, [Click Here](#)

Community Engagement Tool #3: One-on-One Conversations

We all know the word of a trusted friend or colleague can go miles to open doors. Building those one-on-one friendships lies at the very heart of FriendRaising and Community Engagement. And yet it is surprising how few organizations take full advantage of this simple tool!

How to Do It: There are many ways to simply and comfortably engage friends for your mission via one-on-one conversations. Here is just one:

Take one current friend of your mission to breakfast each week, to just chat about what's going on as it relates to your mission. During that breakfast, ask that person if he can suggest 3 other people who might want to know about your work. And then ask if he would call those 3 people to make an introduction for you, so that when you call it's not a cold call.

Then call those people, and tour them through your facility or meet them in their office to engage them in your mission. Don't ask them for anything but their wisdom - just start to build the relationship between their passion / interest and your work. Then follow up with that new friend - a thank you note for their time, an article you saw that you thought they might enjoy, or the new article you just wrote! Keep them in your monthly/bi-monthly contact loop, and continue to follow up.

This is the type of work any of us can feel comfortable with. And it is all generated from the word of mouth of a supportive friend who is already familiar with the importance of your mission.

For details on another approach to one-on-one engagement, [Click Here](#)

The Bottom Line

The bottom line of engaging your community in this way, using these 3 tools, is that folks will be getting a preview, a direct introduction to your work, by showing them precisely what your mission is all about. And that direct approach can have a far greater effect than you had intended with that one article, that one speech, that one breakfast.

A client of ours - a substance abuse group where teens help other teens - thought they were attending a Rotary lunch to show what they were about to a group of 200 prospective supporters. What they didn't count on was the chord they struck. They didn't count on how many of those adults sat quietly dealing with their own undisclosed substance problems. They didn't count on how many had kids they wanted to refer to the program. The group did indeed find

many supporters that day, but they also found so much more. They engaged their mission deeply with the hearts and minds of those in the audience.


Writing, speaking and word-of-mouth will open doors for your organization - doors to people who are already pre-sold on helping address your issues, because, like the pizza, they tasted it right there in the store.

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